

communitarianism

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*from the
Encyclopædia Britannica*

Communitarianism, social and [political philosophy](#) that emphasizes the importance of [community](#) in the functioning of political life, in the analysis and evaluation of political institutions, and in understanding human identity and well-being. It arose in the 1980s as a critique of two prominent philosophical schools: contemporary [liberalism](#), which seeks to protect and enhance personal autonomy and individual rights in part through the activity of government, and [libertarianism](#), a form of liberalism (sometimes called “classical liberalism”) that aims to protect individual rights—especially the rights to liberty and property—through strict limits on governmental power.

There are strong communitarian elements in many modern and historical political and religious belief systems—e.g., in the [Hebrew Bible](#) ([Old Testament](#)) and the Christian [New Testament](#) (Acts 4:32: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common”); in the early [Islamic](#) concept of [shūrā](#) (“consultation”); in [Confucianism](#); in [Roman Catholic](#) social thought (the papal [encyclical](#) *Rerum Novarum* [1891]); in moderate [conservatism](#) (“To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle...of public affections”—[Edmund Burke](#)); and in [social democracy](#), especially [Fabianism](#). Communitarian ideas have also played a significant role in public life through their incorporation into the electoral platforms and policies of Western political leaders of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including British Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#), Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, and U.S. Presidents [Bill Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#).

Varieties of communitarianism



The term *communitarian* was coined in 1841 by John Goodwyn Barmby, a leader of the British [Chartist](#) movement, who used it to refer to [utopian socialists](#) and others who experimented with unusual communal lifestyles. It was rarely used in the generations that followed.



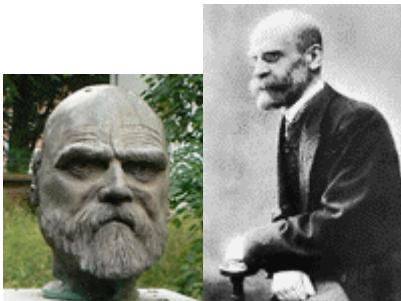
It was not until the 1980s that the term gained currency through its association with the work of a small group of mostly American political philosophers who argued for the importance of the [common good](#) in opposition to contemporary liberals and libertarians, who emphasized the good for individuals, particularly including personal autonomy and individual rights. The Canadian philosopher [Charles Taylor](#) and the American political theorist [Michael Sandel](#) were among the most prominent scholars of this brand of communitarianism. Other political theorists and philosophers who were often cited as communitarians in this sense, or whose work exhibited elements of such communitarian thinking, included Shlomo Avineri, Seyla Benhabib, Avner de-Shalit, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Amitai Etzioni, William A. Galston, [Alasdair MacIntyre](#), Philip Selznick, and Michael Walzer.

During the same period, students of East Asian politics and society used *communitarianism* to describe the social thinking within [authoritarian](#) societies such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia, which extolled social obligations and the importance of the common good and accorded much less weight to autonomy and rights. Indeed, these societies viewed individuals as more or less interchangeable cells who find meaning in their contribution to the social whole

rather than as free agents. Scholars of this kind of communitarianism included the American political theorist Russell A. Fox and the Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan.

In 1990 Etzioni and Galston founded a third school, known as “responsive” communitarianism. Its members formulated a platform based on their shared political principles, and the ideas in it were eventually elaborated in academic and popular books and periodicals, gaining thereby a measure of political currency, mainly in the West. The main thesis of responsive communitarianism is that people face two major sources of normativity, that of the common good and that of autonomy and rights, neither of which in principle should take precedence over the other.

The common good versus individual rights



Whereas the classical liberalism of the [Enlightenment](#) can be viewed as a reaction to centuries of [authoritarianism](#), oppressive [government](#), overbearing communities, and rigid [dogma](#), modern communitarianism can be considered a reaction to excessive [individualism](#), understood by communitarians as an undue emphasis on individual rights, leading people to become selfish or egocentric. Excessive individualism was discussed in an oft-cited communitarian work, [Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life](#) (1985), by the American sociologist [Robert Neelly Bellah](#), who observed that by the early 1980s most Americans had become self-centred. Increasing prosperity from the 1950s, among other factors, had contributed to a decline in respect for traditional authority and institutions, such as [marriage](#), and fostered a kind of materialistic hedonism, according to many communitarians. Earlier [sociologists](#) such as [Ferdinand Tönnies](#) and [Émile Durkheim](#) had discussed such antisocial tendencies in the context of [modernization](#), which they viewed as a historical transition from oppressive but nurturing communities (*Gemeinschaft*) to liberating but impersonal societies (*Gesellschaft*). They warned of the dangers of [anomie](#) (normlessness) and

[alienation](#) in modern societies composed of atomized individuals who had gained their liberty but lost their social moorings. Essentially the theses of Tönnies and Durkheim were supported with contemporary social-scientific data'

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in [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#) (2000), by the American political scientist Robert Putnam.



The close relation between the individual and the community was discussed on a theoretical level by Sandel and Taylor, among other academic communitarians, in their criticisms of philosophical liberalism, including especially the work of the American liberal theorist [John Rawls](#) and that of the German Enlightenment philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#). They argued that contemporary liberalism and libertarianism presuppose an incoherent notion of the individual as existing outside and apart from society rather than embedded within it. To the contrary, they argued, there are no generic individuals but rather only Germans or Russians, Berliners or Muscovites, or members of some other particularistic community. Because individual identity is partly constituted (or "constructed") by culture and social relations, there is no coherent way of formulating individual rights or interests in abstraction from social contexts. In particular, according to these communitarians, there is no point in attempting to found a theory of justice on principles that individuals would choose in a hypothetical state of ignorance of their social, economic, and historical circumstances (from behind a Rawlsian "veil of ignorance"), because such individuals cannot exist, even in principle.

Liberal scholars argued that this line of criticism is overstated or misconceived. Despite its emphasis on autonomy and rights, they contended, contemporary liberalism is not incompatible with the notion of a socially embedded self. Indeed, Rawls himself, in his foundational work *A*

Theory of Justice (1971), recognized the importance of what he called “social unions” and asserted that “only in a social union is the individual complete.” Thus, according to liberals, the communitarian critique does not rebut the core of liberal theory but merely serves as a corrective to “stronger” liberal doctrines such as libertarianism, which does embrace an atomized notion of individual identity (*see below* [A synthesis: Rights and responsibilities](#)). Academic communitarians also drew upon [Aristotle](#) and the German [idealist](#) philosopher [Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel](#) to argue that some conception of the good must be formulated on the social level and that the community cannot be a normative-neutral realm. Unless there is a social formulation of the good, there can be no normative foundation upon which to draw to settle conflicts of value between different individuals and groups. Such an overriding good (e.g., the national well-being) enables persons with different moral outlooks or ideological backgrounds to find principled (rather than merely

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prudential) common ground.

Liberals and libertarians responded by characterizing the communitarian position as akin to East Asian authoritarian communitarianism. They also argued that social formulations of the good—and the obligations they generate, which individuals must then discharge—can sometimes be oppressive. Some libertarians cited [taxes](#) and mandatory vaccinations as examples of such obligations.

A synthesis: Rights and responsibilities

Responsive communitarianism may be considered a synthesis of both liberal and academic-communitarian concerns. Sandel and Taylor in effect held that many forms of philosophical liberalism, especially libertarianism, overemphasize autonomy and rights at the expense of the common good. However, in doing so, they were less than clear about the standing of individual rights, including [human rights](#). Indeed, Alasdair MacIntyre asserted that rights were merely figments of the imagination, like [unicorns](#). Responsive communitarians attempted to bridge this divide. In their platform and in their academic works, they posited that all societies must heed

the moral claims of two core values, the common good and autonomy and rights. They also held that, because actual societies tend to tilt toward one core value or the other, they need to be pulled back toward the centre. Thus Japan, in their view, was strongly dedicated to the common good but insufficiently committed to the rights of women, ethnic minorities, and the disabled, while the United States during the presidential administration of [Ronald Reagan](#) (1981–89) and the United Kingdom during the prime ministership of [Margaret Thatcher](#) (1979–90) attached undue importance to individual rights. The early prime ministership of [Tony Blair](#) demonstrated a concern for the common good through its policies of [devolution](#) and the “stakeholder society” (the idea that businesses should be responsive to workers, consumers, and other groups whose interests they affect), as did the early administration of [George W. Bush](#) through its dedication to “compassionate conservatism.” After the 2001 [September 11 attacks](#), however, the common good in the United States was increasingly identified with national security, and some individual rights (e.g., the right to [habeas corpus](#)) were curtailed.

In the same vein, responsive communitarians also warned against excessively expansive definitions of rights and championed modern communities in which people find both a rich web of social relations and considerable degrees of freedom. In the early 21st century, responsive communitarians believed that the Scandinavian countries had achieved the best balance, though even there some individual rights were being curtailed for security reasons and in response to anti-immigrant sentiment.

Policy implications

Responsive communitarianism developed criteria for the formulation of
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policies that would enable societies to cope with the potential conflicts between the common good and individual rights, including in areas such as [public health](#) versus individual privacy and national security versus individual liberty. These criteria, which must be applied jointly, included the following:

- 1. No change is justified in governing public policies and norms unless society encounters serious challenges, because these kinds of changes exact considerable societal costs. (The September 11 attacks constituted such a challenge.)
- 2. Limitations on rights can be considered only if there are significant gains to the common good—what the U.S. courts refer to as a “compelling interest”—and if the intrusion is as limited as possible.
- 3. Adverse side effects that result from policy changes must be treated, above all, by introducing stronger mechanisms of accountability and oversight.

An example of the application of these criteria can be seen in the debate in the United States concerning whether to improve public health by testing newborn babies for [HIV](#). According to communitarians, such tests would be justified if: (1) they saved lives (an infant infected with HIV has a strong chance of not developing [AIDS](#) if it is not breastfed and is treated with the drug [AZT](#)), (2) the intrusion were limited to testing blood that would be collected anyway, and (3) the adverse side effects could be limited by regulations that ban the disclosure of test results to nonmedical personnel.

Socially constructed preferences

The communitarian approach challenges the liberal view—reflected in many [social sciences](#), especially neoclassical [economics](#) and the study of [law](#)—that the political and economic preferences of individuals should be respected and that their aggregation should guide the governance of the polity (through voting) and the economy (through the influence of consumer spending on the production and distribution of [consumer goods](#)). It is fully legitimate, for example, for public authorities to urge people to resist the appeals of political extremists or to encourage them to save more of their money. Communitarianism also challenges the libertarian position that it is paternalistic to interfere with individual choices based on personal preferences. In keeping with their view concerning the social constitution of individual identity, communitarians argue that personal preferences are to a significant extent not autonomous but rather a reflection of the larger culture, aspects of which can be heavily influenced by nonrational forces such as commercial [advertising](#). Hence, public efforts to influence such preferences in beneficial ways, say in campaigns against [smoking](#) and [obesity](#), do not undermine personal autonomy and are not a violation of human dignity.

The third sector

Communitarianism adds a major element to a centuries-old debate in the West over the proper roles of government on the one hand and the [market](#) on the other. Communitarians argue that attention also must be paid to the role of civil society, including families, local and nonresidential communities, voluntary associations, schools, places of worship, foundations, and nonprofit corporations. It stresses that much of the behaviour that must be regulated in any society, as<script src="http://adserver.adtechus.com/addyn/3.0/5308.1/1388446/0/170/ADTECH;target=_blank;grp=241;key=history+society+government+philosophy+social+sciences;kvqsegs=D;kvtopicid=1366457;misc=1319933053567"></script> well as the factors that encourage people to discharge their social responsibilities (e.g., caring for children), are influenced by this third sector. Communitarians point to the importance of social norms and informal social controls in fostering pro-social conduct and in providing the moral foundations (e.g., trust) required for the successful operation of both governments and markets. The American political journalist Jonathan Rauch introduced the term “soft communitarianism” to refer to communitarianism that focuses on the role of civil society, in contrast to “hard,” East Asian communitarianism, which views the state as the primary social agent.

Cultural relativism and the global community

Because communitarians favour communal formulations of the good, which are necessarily particular to each community, they are vulnerable to the charge of [ethical relativism](#), or to the claim that there is no absolute good but only different goods for different communities, cultures, or societies. [Walzer](#) adopted a clearly relativistic position in his book *Spheres of Justice* (1983), in which he asserted that the [caste](#) system is “good” by the standards of traditional Indian society. Critics argued, however, that his position was untenable. One simply needs to consider a community that champions honour killings, [lynchings](#), or book burnings to realize that communities should not be the ultimate arbiters of that which is good. While acknowledging that different communities may have different ultimate values, Taylor argued—as did Rawls—that an “overlapping consensus” on specific norms and policies is still possible, though different communities may have different reasons for believing that a given norm or policy is right. In the

United States, for example, [abortion](#)-rights and antiabortion activists have worked together to make [adoption](#) easier and to improve the quality of [day-care centres](#). According to a much more-contested argument, advanced by the American scholar of religion Don Browning, there are some substantive universal values, such as human rights and the integrity of the global climate, that can provide a foundation for particularistic, communal ones.

Closely related to the question of the scope of morality is the question of the scope of community itself. Historically, communities have been local. However, as the reach of economic and technological forces extended, more-expansive communities became necessary in order to provide effective normative and political guidance to and control of these forces—hence the rise of national communities in Europe in the 17th century. Since the late 20th century there has been a growing recognition that the scope of even these communities is too limited, as<script src="http://adserver.adtechus.com/addyn/3.0/5308.1/1388451/0/170/ADTECH;target=_blank;grp=241;key=history society+government+philosophy+social sciences;kvqsegs=D;kvtopicid=1366457;misc=1319933054279"></script> many challenges that people now face, such as the threat of nuclear war and the reality of global environmental degradation, cannot be handled on a national basis. This has led to the quest for more-encompassing communities. The most advanced experiment in building a supranational community is the [European Union](#) (EU). However, so far the EU has not developed the kind of social integration and shared values that a strong community requires.

A similar issue arises with regard to the global community, currently more an ideal than a reality. Could such a community be constructed top-down, say, through some kind of enhanced [United Nations](#) (UN)? Or will it arise from the bottom up, through societal processes and institutions such as international [nongovernmental organizations](#) (NGOs), the transnational sharing of norms (e.g., for protecting the environment), a global second [language](#) (about one quarter of the world's population has at least a functional command of [English](#)), and other informal social networks? The question remains whether, ultimately, world governance can thrive without a worldwide community.

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Additional Reading

Communitarianism and liberalism

Discussion of communitarianism as a response to liberalism can be found in Daniel Bell, *Communitarianism and Its Critics* (1993). Liberal responses to communitarian critiques are discussed in Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 2nd ed. (1996).

Academic communitarianism

Various philosophical perspectives within academic communitarianism are represented in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (1984); William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (1991); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (1989); Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (1996); and Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (1998), and *Justice* (2009).

Responsive communitarianism

Discussions of communitarian theory, as well as responsive-communitarian answers to particular policy questions, can be found in Philip Selznick, *The Communitarian Persuasion* (2002); and Amitai Etzioni, *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message* (2003), also containing an exposition of the formation of the responsive-communitarian movement, and *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (2004). A useful anthology is Amitai Etzioni, Andrew Volmert, and Elanit Rothschild (eds.), *The Communitarian Reader* (2004).

East Asian communitarianism

East Asian communitarianism is discussed in Russell A. Fox, "Confucian and Communitarian Responses to Liberal Democracy," in *The Review of Politics*, 59(3):561–592 (Summer 1997); and Joseph Chan, "A Confucian Perspective on Human Rights for Contemporary China," in J. Bauer and D. Bell (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* (1999), pp. 212–237.

Modern Western societies

The role of rights

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